

SERMON: OUR TRANSFIGURATION

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The word “transfiguration or transfigure” it’s not really a word that we use in everyday language. To undergo a complete change in appearance but to something more shining and beautiful. The devastation of cyclone Gabrielle is definitely a complete change in appearance for some parts of our country in particular the Hawkes Bay and East Coast regions and all the small townships that surround it. People waiting on rooftops amidst tragedy and fear become transfigured when a helicopter arrives to rescue them. People who have been unable to contact loved ones become transfigured when they get 10 minutes of free internet to make that connection. A transfiguration occurs when two brothers discover each other when they thought the other was dead. A transfiguration occurs when families are reunited with their loved ones.

But for the region and the destroyed suburbs and homes, a transfiguration for these places is something that will take place much later down the track when all the horrors of the floods and landslides are cleaned away. Perhaps then we can refer to these places as having undergone a transfiguration moving from devastation to restoration.

But how do we transfigure people? Those who have tragically lost loved one’s parents whose 2-year-old baby was swept off the mother’s shoulders into the raging flood waters! A wife who lay sleeping in her bed when at 4am the hillside crashed into her bedroom burying her and killing her immediately. The opposite of transfiguration has occurred for our once beautiful country.

There are some places where we can go to see people transfigured when a child is born, when a toddler takes its first steps or says its first word. For example, in a sport game look at the parents, look at the kids, sometimes it's very hard to recognize them when their child is performing their best game especially when they are excelling. A couple on their wedding day become transfigured and they glow in the beauty of the celebration.

When Rev John Mcfarlane and the people on the boat finally reached dry land, they would have been transfigured. Approximately 3 months sailing on rough ocean seeing nothing but water to finally arriving at a new place to call home. Stepping out and touching the sand on the Petone foreshore would have been a very transfiguring moment, full of hope, excitement, and expectation. Obviously, their relief would have been tinged with some bewilderment and fear as they saw that Petone was not an established town or city like the one they had left this was a very young town and country. But Rev. Macfarlane went on to establish St. Andrew's now St. Andrew's on the Terrace and 182 years later, here we sit remembering that time.

This Gospel story from Mark is both literally and figuratively a "mountain-top experience." Did it really happen? Only these 3 disciples lived to tell the story, take it, or leave it. On the mountain top the voice of God echoed around them saying, "This is my Son, the Beloved; listen to him!" Glowing face and clothes, visits from famous figures of the past, hovering clouds and heavenly voices...Wow! It was so extra ordinary that when it was all over, and Jesus and Peter and James and John were headed back down the mountain, Jesus told

them to "tell no one about what they had seen." That made sense. Who would have believed it anyway? But the three of them believed it. They had been there, and those moments on that mountain would forever mark their lives and change the way they looked at everything. Certain "WOW" moments have a way of doing that.

Have you had a mountain top experience? When was the last time you saw something amazing and came away feeling Wow that was incredible? Some of you might relate the time you came to faith. On the mountain top everything is wonderful and amazing, until we begin our descent. Obviously, we cannot stay on top of the mountain forever we have to come down sometime.

If you have a look at different Christian denominations some churches believe that every worship service should be a mountain top experience and so the music the preaching, the praying is all in a tone that is majestic trying to bring the mountain down to the people or take the people up to the mountain. Other churches prefer to stay at the foot of the mountain and allow only their chosen to go up the mountain and come back to tell the story, others quite like to stay down in the valleys. We are like that too as individuals, there are those who try to climb the entire world's highest mountains, compete in triathlons. We all have challenges in our lives that we see as our Everest's, some of you have reached the summit and are happy to be settled back on ground zero, some of us have yet to encounter our Everest's and might not be ready for the challenge of the summit.

The Season after the Epiphany ends with the story of Jesus' transfiguration. This revealing of Jesus' glory is a turning point, marking the end of Jesus' ministry in Galilee and the beginning of the journey towards Jerusalem and the fate that awaits Jesus there. Just before today's reading, Peter declares that Jesus is the Messiah. But Peter does not understand Jesus' teaching about the kind of Messiah Jesus has come to be.

Six days later, Jesus takes Peter, James, and John up on a mountain. While there, Jesus' appearance is transfigured – Jesus shines. The disciples see Jesus talking with Moses and Elijah. This event has echoes of Moses on Mt. Sinai; his face was transfigured when he was in God's presence and received the Law. Elijah also experienced God's presence on Sinai. For Mark, Jesus fulfills the work of the Law and the prophets.

Jesus' shining garments mark him as one who has triumphed through martyrdom. Jesus' changed appearance – a “metamorphosis”– reflects his nature as both divine and human and anticipates Jesus' changed appearance at the Resurrection.

Peter grasps a sense of the sacred and wants to preserve it; he offers to build three tents. The word used for “tent” can mean “tabernacle,” the same word used in John 1:14 to describe the incarnate Jesus “dwelling” among us. This word also connects with the Exodus story of the tent in the wilderness, and the Ark where God's glory dwells.

This time must have been a terrifying and amazing experience for the three disciples, but Jesus cautions them not to tell anyone about it. We have seen this before in Mark's gospel. It is not yet time for the disciples to proclaim the good news. The meaning of Jesus' messiah ship is to remain a secret for the time

being. As we move into the Season of Lent, we feel the tension building as Jesus' ministry continues.

Are these stories inventions by the writer or writers of Mark's gospel, and then by Matthew and Luke who each added details which suited their story-telling and theological emphasis? Is the transfiguration story really a resurrection appearance story, which somehow ended up in the wrong place?

Sometimes those kinds of questions are important, but not always. Sometimes it is valuable simply to take a narrative at face value, to accept it as it is, and to ask not "did this happen or not?" but "what might this particular story be trying to tell its readers?"

One way of answering that question is to look at where the story appears in the gospels. In Mark's gospel, the first to be written, and in Matthew and Luke, which were based on Mark, the transfiguration narrative comes at a turning point in the story of Jesus. Up until this point, the story has been about a ministry essentially conducted in the towns and villages and countryside of northern Israel, Galilee. From the transfiguration the story changes and becomes an account of Jesus and the disciples journeying to Jerusalem and to the confrontation there between Jesus and the establishment, resulting in his death.

Just before you enter the journey with Jesus to Jerusalem and death, the gospel writers might be saying by positioning this story here, remember what we now know was the goal of his journey – the opening up of God through the one (Jesus) who fulfilled the law and the prophets as they were symbolised by Moses and Elijah.

Peter, James, and John were given – a vision of the ultimate outcome. The three disciples and subsequent readers of the story were being shown that the one who was

soon to suffer, the one about to be rejected and abandoned, the one about to be defeated by his enemies and crucified, shared the brightness and glory and very nature of God on that mountain top.

Could it be that the gospel writers were saying Jesus gave at least some of his disciples a vision of the ultimate end, without which he knew they would just run out of energy and conviction and give up the journey altogether?

On the mountain top or in the valley. I wonder where we might place ourselves, our church, our lives? Are we mountain top seekers? Are we seeking to be transfigured? Are we living lives of transfiguring hope? What does that mean? Are you and I people of transfiguration? As we begin our journey through this Lenten season, we will encounter many different experiences happening in our families, in our lives, with our bodies with our partners, with our children and our grandchildren. As we leave this place let us travel together gently through this Lenten season. Amen.